A School and Public Librarian Find Common Ground on the Common Core

By Nina Lindsay and Olga Nesi in conversation, and moderated by Daryl Grabarek. on October 21, 2013 [1 Comment](http://www.slj.com/2013/10/standards/common-core/a-school-and-public-librarian-find-common-ground-on-the-common-core/#comments)



Illustration by Eva Vázquez

In *SLJ*‘s recent “Common Core and the Public Librarian” one-hour live webcast, Olga Nesi, regional coordinator for the New York City Department of Education, Division of Library Services, and Nina Lindsay, the children’s services coordinator for Oakland (CA) Public Library, discussed the national initiative and, in particular, what it means for public librarians. The following is an excerpted and edited transcript of that conversation.

**Where do public libraries fit in addressing the Common Core State Standards?**This was the question explored during the recent “Common Core and the Public Librarian” webcast, the fifth in *School Library Journal*’s “On Common Core” series. In the one-hour live broadcast, Olga Nesi, regional coordinator for the New York City Department of Education, Division of Library Services, and Nina Lindsay, the children’s services coordinator for Oakland (CA) Public Library, discussed the national initiative and, in particular, what it means for public librarians. *SLJ* editor Daryl Grabarek moderated the event. The following is an excerpted and edited transcript of that conversation.

**Nina Lindsay:**The question that’s on everybody’s mind is, Does the Common Core matter to public librarians? We’re not educators, and it’s not our responsibility to implement the standards, but we are accountable to our communities.

**Olga Nesi:** I’ve conducted a number of workshops with public librarians, and the primary reason that they believe Common Core State Standards [CCSS] matter is because students are one of their larger patron bases. They’re going to have to help kids with some very different types of assignments, and without clarity about the standards, they’re feeling ill-equipped to deal with their needs.

The line of accountability is not direct, but as their patrons’ needs change, one might argue that public librarians are indirectly responsible to the CCSS and will need to make changes in the ways they serve these patrons.

Finally, the CCSS matter because they reflect a national agenda—one that appears to have some staying power. Because it’s such a major shift, it’s opening up an opportunity for school and public librarians to develop mutually beneficial strategies for contending with this new landscape. Nina, have you heard of any changes precipitated by these standards, other than more nonfiction requests and changes that cycle around collection development?

**NL:**You’ve just described two of the things that I’ve been hearing about and seeing. In my own library system, we’ve witnessed a huge increase in requests for books on specific Lexile levels because of the school district’s switch to that system. It’s great that the schools are sending families to us, and we’re figuring out how to make recommendations based on them, but we know Lexiles aren’t the entirety of the Common Core.

Additional changes we’re anticipating are with assignments. We’re practiced at decoding the homework/reference interview, but it may take us time to figure out how to respond as the nature of assignments shifts.

Public librarians are still trying to figure out exactly what “text complexity” means, and if teachers are looking for the same things we are when we review nonfiction: authority, context, audience, style, documentation, design and illustration, and the different ways of presenting information to readers. And we’re wondering if we can be as effective booktalking and conducting nonfiction readers’ advisory—reaching beyond the information needed, matching texts to readers based on style and other elements.

**ON:** You’ve brought up some really important points, including a common language to discuss “text complexity.” The reason that Lexile levels are what we’re reaching for right now is that they’re easy and everything else is looking difficult. Any frustration that public librarians are feeling about them is completely justified; it’s the same frustration that many school librarians feel, primarily because we all understand that there’s something reductive about slapping a number, label, or level on a book. So Lexile is just a starting place, but it’s not the end.

When it comes to the reference questions you’ll be asked, my feeling is that they are going to be deeply connected to the materials that educators are requesting their students to use. We need to consider our instructional goals, and how to convey them to public librarians.  
With students, I’m afraid it’s going to be more of the same. And honestly, just thinking about that is deeply exhausting. Kids largely don’t understand what they’re being asked to do!

**NL:** That’s probably everyone’s deepest concern, and part of our anxiety, too, because as public librarians, we’re not part of the feedback loop.

**ON**: True, we share a building with teachers. To add to our concerns, what some kids may be looking for doesn’t quite exist in the form that they need it.

The biggest stumbling block we face may be coming up with a common language. So, Nina, where the standards are concerned, what does ideal public library and school collaboration look like?

**NL:** I just want to say, I think that school library media specialists are goddesses—they have to stay on top of two professions! In meetings with teachers, I’m really intimidated by the language. So, common language is the first thing. Reading about the CCSS, I know that there are layers of meaning that I’m not getting.

**ON:** I’m here to assure you that we are in the same boat! The standards are very dense.

**NL:**Just having that person with a foot in both worlds is really helpful. The ideal would be to keep public librarians ahead of the curve on what’s coming, especially as it relates to discussions about curriculum and recommended reading. If asked for advice, we may be able to provide suggestions and alternatives if specific resources aren’t available. We love talking with adults in an involved way about children’s books.

**ON:** That’s something schools are going to need a tremendous amount of help with because we tend to use the same resources year after year. Public librarians have the amazing ability to be aware of everything that’s out there before it’s anywhere on the scene and to assist people about how to use a range of resources. Our primary concern in a school library is the instructional piece, so clearly that’s where we can be a liaison.

**NL:** So how do we—as selectors, reviewers, and critics—help the publishing world address teachers’ needs so we can close the circle? How do we inform vendors and publishers about our needs if we’re still not quite sure what we’re looking for? And how do we talk about text complexity within a review or at a group discussion?

**ON:** Where vendors are concerned, I think they’re doing exactly what they should be doing, namely selling products. We need to be cautious, but not accusatory. There are vendors that are genuinely interested in helping us. However, we must be well versed to be able to express what we need. On most days, frankly, where materials that are aligned to the CCSS are concerned, I feel like a howling newborn, and that’s because I know exactly what I want, but can’t express it clearly to the people who can best help meet my needs.

Text complexity starts with the quantitative measures such as Lexile levels—sentence length, occurrence of complex vocabulary, etc. But then there’s a whole other layer of criteria, namely qualitative measures: layout, design, illustration, purpose and meaning, structure, language complexity, and the background knowledge necessary to read a text. Finally, the Common Core addresses readers and tasks. We can determine that a text corresponds to a certain Lexile level and that it’s appropriate for a particular grade, but if a child is reading three grades below level, suddenly that text is a lot more complex.

And task has everything to do with the instruction. You can ask students to read a passage and answer comprehension questions, but if you’re asking them to read a piece of nonfiction to make a claim and support that claim with evidence from that same text, the text becomes more challenging to read. The Common Core is asking us to think about multiple criteria when we evaluate a text for complexity.

**Daryl Grabarek:**A question on text complexity from our audience: “Doesn’t text complexity apply to fiction as well?”

**ON:** Yes, absolutely.

**DG:** A number of listeners have sent in questions about databases and their role in the CCSS.

**ON:** CCSS call for teachers to use a variety of resources, in a variety of formats. Databases are phenomenal resources, especially since publishing has some catching up to do…and public libraries often have better subscriptions than school libraries. The only barrier I can see to using them is, perhaps, convincing teachers that it’s appropriate to use articles versus full-length books. And that’s a road that school librarians can pave.

**NL:** Not only are databases essential information sources, but some of the texts that we’ve relied on, specifically to address homework requests, are now only available online. It’s so important for teachers to allow students to use them.

**DG:** From another listener: “It sounds like communication between schools and public librarians is going to be really important. Any suggestions on how to build those lines of communication?”

**NL:** In terms of local conversations, making yourself available to school librarians—some are wed to horrendous schedules—for a conversation and inviting them to set the terms and express their needs is a first step. And there may be groups meeting about the CCSS in your city right now, perhaps a parent task force at the district level, or a partnership happening with a service provider conducting literacy tutoring in your school. And check the American Library Association website for information and forums on the CCSS.

**DG:** A comment: “I still feel I don’t really know how to purchase materials that classify as Common Core nonfiction.” It’s a statement that keeps coming up during our webcasts and makes me believe that both public and school librarians have had their confidence shaken when it comes to purchasing nonfiction.

**ON:** Yes, it does. Clearly we’re moving away from using materials that have been traditionally created for report writers, toward rich narrative nonfiction—material that perhaps our students haven’t had much exposure to. When I think of the complex texts we want kids to read, I think of Jim Murphy’s and Marc Aronson’s books, and some of those really beautiful titles on animals with photos and a narrative.

**NL:**The “Scientist in the Field” series. I may have had my confidence shaken a bit, but through this process, and during this conversation, my confidence has been restored, knowing that the standards are an evolving question for everybody. Public librarians know what makes good nonfiction. If we’re part of the conversation about what makes well-written, richly textual literary nonfiction, that may help define and clarify this question for everybody else.

**ON:** Absolutely! A commonality between public and school librarians will always be a burning desire to get kids to be avid, independent readers. We all understand that until a child is one, any academic endeavor that they attempt is not going to be as successful as it might have been. Anything that helps us to advance that particular goal is aligned to the Common Core. An independent reader translates to independent learner. The whole point of the CCSS is to create kids who can learn outside of us, without us.